

SWAFFHAM TOWN COUNCIL

Minutes of the Finance and General Purposes meeting on Wednesday 8th December 2004 at 7.00p.m. in the Assembly Rooms, Swaffham.

Present: Mayor Cllr P. Buxton (in the chair)

Councillors: - Mr D. Butters, Mrs C. Baker, Mr D. Cannon,
Cllr Darby, Mr B. Emmerson, Cllr Greaves,
Cllr Lister, Cllr Matthews, Cllr Sherwood,
Cllr Stockdale, Cllr Wise

Clerk:- Mr R. Bishop.
Deputy Clerk:- Mrs M. Meyrick
Internal Auditor:- Mr B. Clements

Public: 4

1. APOLOGIES AND REASONS FOR ABSENCE.

- 1.1. Cllr Mann (attending another meeting).
- 1.2. Cllr Lister will be arriving late.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST – for items included on the Agenda.

- 2.1. Cllr Stockdale declared an interest on allotment fees.
- 2.2. Cllr Emmerson declared an interest on Twinning.
- 2.3. Cllr Emmerson, Cllr Butters, Cllr Darby and Cllr Baker declared an interest relating to the Museum.

The Clerk advised that in normal circumstances Councillors would not have to declare an interest relating to the Museum but on this occasion they will be dealing with the annual grant.

3. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

- 3.1. The minutes of the Finance and General Purposes Committee of the 29th September 2004 was circulated to Councillors and will be agreed at the Full Council meeting on the 15th December 2004.

4. QUARTERLY FINANCIAL REPORT

- 4.1. The accounts report for receipts and payment were circulated to Councillors.

4.2. Councillors had received a written report from the Internal Auditor at the last Full Council meeting. He has observed the Clerk and Deputy Clerk in one short session of budget preparation; he also had sight of an earlier draft copy of both the report and the budget in order to iron out any presentation problems. The report would normally come out in January. As part of internal audit checks the Market Superintendent was accompanied last Saturday and watched as the money being recorded and put away safely. The Internal Auditor is aware of the procedures for preparing the budget.

- 4.3. There has been a request for no rent to be charged to stall holders of the market for two Saturdays in December as Christmas Day and New Years Day fall on these two days.

It was unanimously agreed to refund market rent for two Saturdays in December as they fall on Christmas Day and New Years Day.

5. BUDGET 2005/06

5.1. The Town Clerk gave a Budget presentation for 2005/06.

The information for the Budget presentation is contained within ten accounting cost centres of Market, Town Hall, Museum, Assembly Rooms, Allotments, Cemetery, Open Spaces & Amenities, Administration & Miscellaneous, the Precept and a new cost centre introduced this year for Capital Projects.

There have been additional cost centres added for capital projects. The creation of another bank account for capital projects is being looked at with advice from the Internal Auditor to make things clearer. Consideration has been given to the licensed traders of the market by only increasing the rent by 2.5% compared to 5% for the casual and no increase to the farmers market to fully establish this. Another consideration for the future is whether the farmers market would run over 10 months or 12. The museum refurbishment is not in progress but the preparation for it is.

Cllr Lister arrived at 7.55pm

The Town Clerk clarified various facts and figures or answered questions on detail throughout the presentation. There was a question relating to the interest from the 'Jubilee Heritage Fund', was this being used to prop up the precept? The Clerk stated that the interest was used to service the loans that have subsequently been repaid by the Council following a change of policy. The Internal Auditor Brian Clements verified that Councillors had been given a document at a finance meeting back in the autumn that proved that the interest earned on the investments covered the cost of the loan for the Town Hall extension.

Recommendations and decisions

a) There is a rise in the level of salaries this next year due to increased administrative workload and a further member of staff being needed specifically to cover reception and basic administrative duties and to take account of annual increment raises etc. It is envisaged that staffing levels and salaries may well rise in the future, but that the vast majority of any increase will be funded from an increase in income received from Agency and Service Level agreements and not from the Precept. The Town Council have also taken on the responsibility of PAYE/Employment issues for Swaffham Museum Ltd under an agency agreement. It was recommended that the Council consider bringing forward the start date of the new member of staff and the additional hours for the Deputy and Assistant Town Clerk to 31st January 2005. There followed a discussion.

It was agreed with 5 votes for and 4 votes against to bring forward the start date of the new member of staff and additional hours for the Deputy and Assistant Town Clerk to 31st January 2005.

b) The Saturday Market has taken a downward turn over the past year or so. It has been difficult to replace some traders that have retired, moved on or ceased trading. The income from casual traders has increased; this confirms a larger turnover of traders than in the previous two years. It is therefore recommended to increase the difference between casual trade and licensed trade with an increase of 5%.

It was agreed with 1 abstention for the Casual Traders rate to be increased by 5% from £21 to £22 from 1st April 2005

c) The overall long standing debts have been reduced by more than 60% in the past 18 months. There is a year of disruption to follow with the Town Centre Regeneration. The projected income for next year is reduced to take account of this. It is recommended for the Licensed Traders rate to be increased by 2.5%.

It was agreed with 1 against for the Licensed Traders rate to be increased by 2.5% from £3.41 to £3.50 per foot from 1st April 2005.

d) The Farmers Market has been running now for nine months and is coming into the worst time of the year of Jan, Feb and March. This is promoted on our web site and with banners and signs. The Council need to retain those who come regularly and to encourage more traders if possible. It is recommended for no change for the pricing structure to Farmers Market.

It was unanimously agreed for no change to the pricing structure to the Farmers Market for 2005/06.

The Market expenditure is projected to take account of re-negotiated waste collection contracts. Reverting to a self-cleansing market is always an option that could save in overall costs but may be more difficult to enforce. It is not recommended to change in the financial year 2005/06; more information is required to allow the Council to consider this at some point in the future.

e) The budget for the Town Hall incorporates the various changes going on and already agreed by the Council. There is the continuation of work on site at the Museum in the early part of the financial year and members of the public having to use the Cley Road entrance as the only way into the Town Hall. It is recommended that the Town Clerk monitors the income and expenditure and recommends adjustments if required.

It was agreed that the Town Clerk monitors the income and expenditure for the Town Hall and recommend adjustments to the pricing structure if required.

f) The first section of the Museum expenditure is the annual grant, increased this year by 3.3% to £3,100 as per the STC/Swaffham Museum Ltd agreement.

The second section of the Museum expenditure is a percentage of the Town Hall day to day costs i.e. Electricity, Heating, Rates and Water Rates. A calculation of 50% of all these items has been budgeted for in year 2005/06. There will be a saving on Rates which will be exempt when Swaffham Museum Ltd achieves charitable status in 2005.

It was recommended that there is no change to Museum finance policy.

It was agreed by 7 votes for and 5 abstentions that there is no change to the Museum finance policy.

g) The Assembly Rooms closes at the end of this year and work is also in progress at the Community Centre. There may be an opportunity to tender for a Service Level Agreement in the favour of Swaffham Town Council. This could provide sufficient income similar to an Agency Agreement to enable the Town Council to deliver a service, in the case of both buildings an agreement could be beneficial to the Council to provide a bookings service at the Town Hall as at present, plus cleaning and care-taking as required. It was recommended that the Finance Committee considers when an invitation to tender comes from the Icen Partnership.

It was agreed that the Finance Committee consider the Town Clerk's report when an invitation to tender comes from the Icen Partnership.

Page 200

f) The allotments are well used in some areas of the town and underused in other parts. In proportion to previous years last year the Council increased the rents considerably. Last year a projected downturn did not happen and therefore as a result additional income has been forthcoming. It was recommended to abolish the water rates and charge in favour of an all inclusive charge for the allotments. It was also recommended to continue with the policy to make the allotments a viable concern by increasing by £5 each to £20 and £25 respectively with no charge for water. Cllr Darby proposed and Cllr wise seconded to increase the rents to £18.40 and £23.40 respectively.

The vote to increase the allotment rents to £18.40 and £23.40 respectively was lost with 2 votes for and 7 against.

Cllr Sherwood proposed to increase the rents as recommended to £20 and £25 respectively.

It was agreed with 7 votes for, 2 votes against and 1 abstention to increase allotments from 1st October 2005 to £20 and £25 respectively and abolish the water rates charge.

g) Whilst this pricing policy will inevitably produce the expected downturn, the projected income may hold up next year as a result of the increased rent. If all sites are retained then there could be a surplus that could be reinvested in clearing up other allotment sites. The projected expenditure on the allotments will not exceed income, although this does not take into account any administration charge. It should be the overall long-term aim to make all sites viable to include an administration charge.

It was agreed with 9 votes for, 1 vote against and 1 abstention for the issues report agreed last year to be forthcoming in the first quarter of the financial year 2005/06 with the overall long-term aim to make all allotment sites viable inclusive of an administration charge.

h) The Cemetery is an on-going project where many improvements were made in the past year and many more are planned for 2005/06. A little investment in officer time for research, preparation of grant bids and use of existing outside staff can deliver all the Council's requirements. The aim is to restore the Chapel, look at a permanent solution i.e. a wall and gates for the Cemetery entrance, improve the driveway kerbs and provide a workshop store in one of the garages. There is also an urgent need for a health and safety programme for checking gravestones, repairing gravestones and surrounds, levelling sunken graves etc. It was recommended to develop a project for grant funding with the Capital Project costs.

It was agreed with 9 votes for and 2 abstentions to continue with the on-going improvement programme, and look to develop a project for grant funding within the Capital Project cost centre.

i) Following initial research it is apparent that exclusive rights charges could be increased substantially. This additional income could initially produce a useful additional income that can help to support the capital improvements proposed for the Cemetery. However, once completed it is envisaged that this will produce a long-term saving for the Council as this income should be put towards staffing costs i.e. grounds-man and administration. It was recommended for the Finance Committee to review Cemetery charges to bring Swaffham cemetery inline with other burial authorities.

It was agreed with 10 votes for and 1 abstention to delegate responsibility to the Town Clerk and the Finance Committee to review the Cemetery Charges, in addition to the normal RPI % increase, implement an appropriate pricing structure in line with other burial authorities from 1st April 2005.

Page 201

j) The income budgeted for open spaces is from the Recreation Ground and the annual visit of the travelling Circus. It also includes an estimated income from sponsorship of floral displays in the town agreed in principle; this needs to be taken forward as a matter of urgency.

It was agreed with 9 votes for the Town Clerk to send a circular letter to traders inviting sponsorship for the forthcoming summer season.

k) Outside Equipment was necessary last year mainly for the Cemetery. The budgeted sum this year is for maintaining the equipment and replacing some of the smaller equipment such as strimmers etc.

It was unanimously agreed for a reduced budget of £1,500 to be put forward for outside equipment maintenance or replacements for 2005/06

l) The Buttercross is the responsibility of the Town Council; it is therefore necessary to continue building a contingency fund for future repairs and maintenance. Similarly the Pedlars Sign needs to be looked after and is currently with Wayland Prison for refurbishment.

It was unanimously agreed for a sum of £2,500 to be added to the £2,500 set aside last year as a contingency for the Buttercross and the Pedlars Sign

m) In September 2004 Swaffham hosted their two twin towns from Hemmoor and Couhe Verac respectively. It was subsequently agreed in principle at the October 2004 meeting to set aside a twinning bursary and discuss the detail of how the Town Council policy can be delivered over the next six years with the Twinning Association. Cllr Darby proposed and Cllr Cannon seconded for £1000 be budgeted for a Twinning Bursary.

It was agreed with 5 votes for and 4 against for a sum of £1,000 be included in the budget for a Twinning Bursary for this financial year 2005/06

n) It is necessary to continue updating the Town Council website established earlier this year.

It was agreed with 1 against to continue updating the website within the budget of £600

o) The Town Clock is in need of further repairs in the long term. It was recommended to set aside £800 for the Town Clock.

It was unanimously agreed to establish a budget of £800 for the Town Clock for 2005/06

p) The Tree Pollarding programme has been in progress for three years now and it is proposed to continue for the next year as a minimum. A lot of the major works have been carried out and it is envisaged that most of the expense will be out of the way after the next financial year.

It was unanimously agreed to continue with the tree pollarding programme within a budget of £1,500 for 2005/06

q) The change of financial policy is reflected in the current year's accounts in repaying the two outstanding loans and using the capital to fund various projects rather than using interest earned to sustain loan repayments. This means that projected interest earned in 2005/06 is significantly less than last year and loan repayments are reduced to zero. The Office Equipment Lease/Maintenance has been increased this year to allow for upgrading

Page 202

and replacement of the photocopier. A budget of £1,600 for office equipment lease/maintenance will allow an additional £100 per quarter to be used to upgrade and replace the current photocopier.

It was agreed for the Town Clerk to have delegated authority to negotiate the best deal for the Council using best value principles with regards to the upgrade of the photocopier.

r) The office equipment replacement fund has been reduced in this year's budget as the majority of equipment is now either replaced or upgraded. The purpose of the budget is to complete the process.

It was agreed to have a reduced budget of £1,500, this allows the Town Clerk the discretion to complete the office equipment replacement or upgrading using best value principles

s) There is a new budget heading this year for Scribe Accounts & Computer Software and one amalgamated heading of Election/By election/Parish Poll. The amalgamated heading brings together two contingency items in the event of a by election or a parish poll being called.

It was unanimously agreed for a budget of £800 be established for Scribe Accounts & Computer Software and a budget of £2,500 that was reduced from £3000 which combines the contingency of a by election and a parish poll

t) New Office Furnishings & Equipment are required to service the new facilities within the Town Hall extension. An initial budget was agreed in the current year's budget, there will be some essential furniture, shelving and many other smaller items that will be necessary to function properly.

It was agreed with 9 votes for and 3 abstentions for a budget of £2,000 to finish off the new office furnishing and equipment to service the new facilities, at the discretion of the Town Clerk under best value principles

u) The main purpose of this cost centre is to be able to monitor each project as it unfolds, to see clearly when grant money comes in and how it is used. The match-funding budget has been reduced by £50,000 and now stands at just £14,000. Whilst this is still a useful sum of money it is actually very low in terms of match funding community projects. It is recommended that the council consider adding a minimum of £6,000 in this financial year, a minimum of £15,000 in each of the following two financial years and to agree a policy to replace any match funding used in the preceding financial years to an agreed balance. Cllr Sherwood proposed and Cllr Emmerson seconded for agreement in principle each year look at the match funding budget but for the Council to consider whether any funds will be put into it each year..

It was agreed for a match funding budget in principle but it was for the next Council to consider whether any funds will be put into it year on year.

v) The General Reserves are lower than the guidance for an acceptable minimum level to be held by the Town Council. It was recommended that the Council should consider that if u) was accepted as policy there should be no change in this financial year but General Reserves should be increased in 2006/07 and 2007/08 in line with six months budgeted expenditure. If u) was rejected then General Reserves should be increased proportionally over the next three years including 2005/06 to cover six months budgeted expenditure, adjusting the Precept as required. The Clerk recommended that subject to agreeing an

Page 203

increase in General Reserves the Precept should be adjusted accordingly in 2005/06 to account for the increase. It was proposed by Cllr Darby and seconded by Cllr Matthews to leave general reserves for consideration at next year's budget.

It was agreed with 8 votes for and 2 against to give consideration to General Reserves at the 2006/07 budget meeting.

w) The new tax base for 2005/06 is not yet known, so the recommended increase of £9,000 (6.95%) would cost approximately an additional £3.84 at Band D (less than 8p per week). However, there is a chance that the tax base will be increased this year, following the un-expected decrease last year and this will reduce the increase to the Council Tax payer bringing the increase in real terms more in line with inflation. It was recommended for the Precept to be £139,000. Cllr Darby proposed and Cllr Cannon seconded for the precept to be £137,500.

It was agreed with 6 votes for and 4 votes against for the Precept of 2005/06 to be £137,500.

6. PLANNING APPLICATIONS

6.1. Planning Applications:

3PL/2004/1885/F – Erection of conservatory – Mr & Mrs Marengi, Sunset, Princes Street.	
---	--

NO OBJECTION

Cllr Wise left the meeting at 9.30

7. ADMISSION TO MEETINGS ACT (PUBLIC BODIES) 1960 – following the exclusion of the public & press

7.1. The Town Clerk reported the progress made since the extraordinary meeting held on Thursday 25th November and thanked members of the Council for their support. Things have moved on with the structural engineer. Mr. Brain was aware of the budget of £300,000 but stated that his brief was to design a solution to the building as presented to him. Mr. Brain continued to state his case for payment of an outstanding invoice for 74.5 hours additional work to his percentage fee. This is for the re-design of the building to achieve cost savings to bring the project within budget plus undertaking structural design not included within site visits. Mr. Brain implied that the architect should have given the Council financial advice in respect of the budget. Mr. Brain has supplied further details in respect of another outstanding invoice, although refusing to justify disbursements as requested. The aim is to resolve matters amicably. Legal advice will be taken in respect of all outstanding issues relating to the Town Hall and also in respect of leases with the Icen Partnership for the Community Centre and Assembly Rooms, and finally with the Garden Science Trust and the allotment land at Tumbler Hill.

8. BUS SHELTERS

8.1. The Clerk has an appointment with PETER CUDBY from Norfolk County Council tomorrow morning regarding the Bus Shelters. Revised details will be available for discussion at the Full Council meeting 15th December. The land where the new bus shelter is to stand, close to the TIC is not owned by Norfolk County Council, Breckland Council, and Swaffham Town Council or privately by anyone. Former Cllr Paul Green has objected to the temporary shelter and the siting of the new shelter. Peter Cudby is looking for a way ahead, he is suggesting that the Town Council take responsibility for this piece of no mans land and place the shelter upon it, thus stating that the Town Council will then maintain the land on which it stands in addition to the shelter itself. He is looking for guidance from the Town Council. Apparently the design issues have been taken on board in respect of having more glass in the shelters.

The meeting closed at 9.50p.m.

Chairman_____