

UCKFIELD TOWN COUNCIL



Minutes of the meeting of the **General Purposes Committee** held in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Uckfield on Monday 5 February 2024 at 7.00pm

PRESENT:

Cllr. D. Ward (Chair)	Cllr. D. Manvell
Cllr. J. Love	Cllr. P. Selby
Cllr. C. Macve (Vice-Chair)	Cllr. A. Smith

IN ATTENDANCE:

One member of the public
Sarah D'Alessio – Assistant Town Clerk
Holly Goring – Town Clerk
Minutes taken by Holly Goring

1.0 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

Members and officers were reminded to make any declarations of personal and/or prejudicial interests that they may have in relation to items on the agenda.

Councillor J. Love declared an interest in agenda items 6.1 and 12.1 due to her employment with a business based at Victoria Pavilion. Councillor Love was advised that she would need to leave the room for agenda item 12.1.

As Councillor D. Manvell would be late arriving, the Town Clerk advised that Councillor Manvell had declared a prejudicial interest for agenda item 6.3, due to his role as Director for the Uckfield Community Fridge CIC. Councillor Manvell had been advised to leave the room for agenda item 6.3.

2.0 STATEMENTS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC ON MATTERS ON THE AGENDA AT THE CHAIRMAN'S DISCRETION

There were no statements from members of the public.

3.0 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies had been received from Councillor B. Cox due to another commitment.

4.0 MINUTES

4.1 Minutes of the meeting of the General Purposes Committee held on the 4 December 2023

GP35.02.24 Members **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting of the General Purposes Committee on 4 December 2023 be taken as read, confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

4.2 Action list

Members noted the action list and agreed to remove item GP08.06.23.

- 4.3 Project list
Further to seeking clarification on the commencement of the 262 Saturday bus service, members noted the report.

5.0 FINANCIAL MATTERS

- 5.1 To note bills paid
Councillor A. Smith requested that certain unnecessary information be redacted from the report, before members noted the bills paid.

- 5.2 To consider the income and expenditure reports to the end of Nov 2023
Members reviewed the contents of the report.

The Town Clerk explained how income levels were positive, but expenditure was also higher than predicted across all committee areas. The report for Luxfords Restaurant was looking promising with the deficit reducing substantially from that recorded in the previous year. Aspects of expenditure under General Purposes had been more challenging.

The Assistant Town Clerk clarified that a similar increase in salary scales had been budgeted for in the budget setting process for 2024-25. Members subsequently noted the reports.

Councillor D. Manvell arrived at 7.11pm.

- 5.3 To receive the minutes of the Finance Sub-Committee held on 9 January 2024
Members received the draft minutes of the Finance Sub-Committee held on 9 January 2024.

6.0 BUILDINGS

- 6.1 To note the current position with the Council's buildings
Members were presented with a detailed update on the current condition of the Town Council's buildings and the compliance work undertaken.

Councillor D. Ward expressed how disappointed she was by the vandalism in the town, and the impact this was having on community organisations and local businesses. Members noted the report.

- 6.2 To consider a progress update on Ridgewood Village Hall Car Park
Discussions had commenced on the works required to Ridgewood Village Hall car park in 2022, but due to the estimated costs of works to address the drainage concerns and reduction of surface water runoff into the building and neighbouring land/properties, it was thought costs could reach in the region of £200k. The Town Council did not have this level of funds available.

The Estates & Facilities Manager sought the advice of a building firm who had undertaken other works for the Town Council in recent months and presented an alternative proposal to members, which would reduce the costs to nearer £140k.

Councillor C. Macve made a valid point and advised that the granite sets on the roadside needed to be raised. The proposals for the entrance to the car park would not be adequate enough to handle the water coming off New Road. The Town Clerk agreed, stating that water ran off New Road for some way and soaked into the play area on Ridgewood Recreation Ground. Reference was

made to two other locations in Uckfield – the top of Baker Street, and Nevill Green, where East Sussex Highways had created a high berm, to steer the surface water run off away from residential properties.

There was also concern about the aco drains as they needed a fair degree of maintenance and this would be imperative at the entrance to the car park with debris collecting there. It was thought that a concrete channel would be more appropriate.

Councillor P. Selby (a previous resident of New Road) confirmed that the water ran off New Road into Ridgewood Recreation Ground from as far as the pedestrian gate onto the recreation ground all the way past the village hall car park. There was only a grass verge between the road and the adjacent land. He also felt that an aco drain on the entrance to the car park would accumulate substantial silt and debris. An open drain would be preferred.

Councillor J. Love noted her observations with the drainage/run off from Millennium Green, and wondered if the culvert needed clearing on the corner of the land by the track to adjacent properties. Councillor Selby, thought it might be useful to liaise with the adjacent properties to understand their experience of the water flows.

GP36.02.24 Members RESOLVED to:

- (i) note the contents of the report;
- (ii) ask the Town Clerk to liaise with East Sussex Highways and ask for their assistance with creating a berm or raising the road edge along the southern side of New Road adjacent to the recreation ground and car park to reduce surface runoff and;
- (iii) ask the Estates & Facilities Manager to proceed with investigating works involved in Stage 1 (*subject to the modifications discussed which would include changing the aco drain for a concrete channel at the entrance to the car park*) with quotations to be sought from three contractors for the exact same specification.

Councillor D. Manvell left the room for the next item.

6.3 To consider a report from the Uckfield Community Fridge CIC

Members were presented with a report from the Uckfield Community Fridge, which set out a number of actions that they wished to take in response to the recent vandalism with regards to seating, storage and planters.

In the main, members felt that their proposals made good sense, although there were concerns with regards to the security of the shed. The Town Clerk explained that as the shed was a storage unit rather than the size that a person could get into/or sit in, it would be considered less attractive to the culprits.

The Town Clerk was asked to check if the shed was solely for the use of the Community Fridge or if it was also used to store equipment for Brighter Uckfield.

There were also some concerns with the park style benches. The Town Clerk advised that the site was now enclosed, and fenced off. The Town Clerk also reminded members of the plans to increase lighting in this area.

Councillor A. Smith put forward a proposal which was seconded.

- GP37.02.24** With three members voting in favour, and one abstaining, it was **RESOLVED** to:
- (i) note the contents of the report;
 - (ii) to request the Town Clerk to seek clarification on the use of the shed (in terms of who used the shed, the contents of the shed and who had access); and subject to this,
 - (iii) accept their well-considered proposals but do question whether the shed was needed, as the members did not feel the metal shed would be that secure.

Councillor D. Manvell returned to the meeting.

7.0 POLICY

7.1 To consider the Annual Investment Strategy

The Assistant Town Clerk advised members of a proposed change to the policy on page 2, and then led them through powerpoint slides which guided members through proposals for increasing the return we could obtain on the Town Council's business reserves. This had been a recommendation of the Internal Auditor and followed on from a discussion at the Finance Sub-Committee meeting on 9 January 2024.

The majority of the Town Council's reserves were in a Business Reserves account at a rate of 1.45%. £300k was invested in a 12-month fixed bond which matured at 4.89%. The Assistant Town Clerk advised that the minimum amount of reserves within the business reserve account during the year was £700k, and this was currently only earning 1.45% in interest. The Assistant Town Clerk had approached the Town Council's banking services, and was advised that they held a 35 day account and a 95 day account. Funds could be put away for these periods of time, to raise more return on the council's investments.

It was thought that a sum of £500k could be moved into these accounts.

One member was concerned about the financial services compensation scheme should anything happen to the bank as this was only £85k per firm. Members noted that the current banking provider was part owned by the UK Government.

Members were advised that the matter would be reported to Full Council for decision and ratification.

- GP38.02.24** With four members voting in favour, and one voting against, it was **RESOLVED** to recommend to Full Council, that:
- (i) subject to the revision on page 2, that the Annual Investment Strategy be adopted;
 - (ii) the Assistant Town Clerk be asked to investigate the financial services compensation scheme further, and to explore other banking options with large banks such as Lloyds and HSBC, and;
 - (iii) in the meantime, propose to move funds of £400k into the 95 day account, and £100k in the 35 day account.

8.0 ADMINISTRATION

8.1 To receive a report on Health and Safety within the Council

Members sought clarification on the outcome of the annual ROSPA inspections on the Town Council play areas, to which the Town Clerk provided an update.

Clarification was also sought on the water supply to the Signal Box, to which the Town Clerk said all water was turned off, but there was evidence of a leak, so a company had been employed to trace back through the pipework to see if the leak could be found. This investigation has since been halted as its thought that the wrong meter was associated with the Signal Box.

The Town Clerk also clarified that the fire evacuation procedures were being further strengthened.

Members subsequently noted the report.

8.2 To receive Members' audit report

Members noted the completed audit report for November 2023.

9.0 REPORTS FROM COUNCIL REPRESENTATIVES ON OUTSIDE ORGANISATIONS

9.1 To consider reports from: -

(i) Wealden Citizen's Advice
Nothing to report.

(ii) Uckfield Volunteer Centre
Nothing to report.

(iii) Wealden District Association of Local Councils – Mgt Committee
Councillor D. Ward provided a verbal update, which members noted.

(iv) Wealden District Association of Local Councils – Planning Panel
Nothing to report.

10.0 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chair, Councillor D. Ward asked members to join her in wishing His Majesty King Charles III a speedy recovery. News was released that day that he had been diagnosed with cancer, and was undergoing treatment.

The Chair wished to thank the members of the Plans Committee who had worked tirelessly, along with the Town Clerk, to prepare for planning inquiries and hearings over the past four to six months. It was very much appreciated.

11.0 TOWN CLERK'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Town Clerk advised that the electricity and gas contract was up for renewal for the Town Council buildings. The Town Clerk presented members with the renewal figures from four utility providers for gas and electricity.

In terms of gas supply, the Town Council only had four gas boilers, and it was likely that this number would reduce further in the next 12 months with members supporting the use of renewable energies. The Town Clerk did remind members however that at no point should the gas supply be removed from the Civic Centre as this was critical for the commercial kitchen in Luxfords Restaurant and for adequately heating the building and hot water, alongside the Biomass. At present

the total spend on gas was around £14k across the four buildings. Figures were provided for a 12-month and 24-month contract. The Town Clerk thought it would be prudent to continue on a 12-month contract with the current provider for gas (SSE) as there was very little percentage difference (1%) and so few supplies.

The Town Clerk reminded members that one of the caveats with changing utility provider would be that all smart meters would have to be changed with the change of contractor.

The figures received for electricity were however quite different. The Town Council currently spent around £30k per annum for all buildings, with some element recharged to tenants. The figures showed that it would not be wise to sign up to a two-year contract, 12-month contracts were on a better rate, and it would enable the Town Council to keep options open should they reconsider lease agreements etc.

The tariff for the existing provider (SSE) was 17.77% compared with the cheapest rate of (8.22%) for EDF. Members wondered if the current provider could be challenged, and to see if the proposed rate be reduced even midway between the two tariffs. The Town Council was a very good customer with annual expenditure for gas and electricity in the region of £45 to £50k.

GP39.02.24 Members RESOLVED to:

- (i) continue with the current utility provider (SSE) for gas, on a 12 month contract, and;
- (ii) for electricity, to renew on a 12 month contract, but ask the brokers to challenge the existing utility provider on their proposed tariff, and see if they would meet partway between their tariff and that of the lowest (EDF). If the current provider (SSE) did not offer a reduction, then Uckfield Town Council should move to a 12 month contract with EDF for electricity.

12.0 CONFIDENTIAL BUSINESS

GP40.02.24 It was **RESOLVED** that pursuant to Section 1 (2) of the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960, because of the confidential nature of the business to be transacted it was advisable in the public interest that the public be temporarily excluded and they were instructed to withdraw.

Councillor J. Love left the room for the next item.

12.1 To note bad debts

Members reviewed the report. The Assistant Town Clerk advised that one of the customers listed, had since settled their old debt. Members were concerned with the level of debt recorded for one of the customers, and the Town Clerk advised that they were meeting with the customer later that week, so they would find out the reason and if they were waiting on grant funding or revenue before clearing the outstanding debt with the Town Council.

Since the meeting of General Purposes Committee, the above customer had paid a substantial amount of their outstanding debt and advised that it was in fact due to awaiting grant funding. They were advised to consider the frequency of the council's invoicing and perhaps a quarterly invoice would be more suitable rather than monthly.

Members subsequently noted the report.
Councillor J. Love returned to the meeting.

12.2 To receive the minutes of the Personnel Sub-Committee held on 1 November 2023

These were already presented and received at the meeting of General Purposes Committee on 4 December 2023.

12.3 To consider the recommendations of the Personnel Sub-Committee held on 1 November 2023

These were already presented at the meeting of General Purposes Committee on 4 December 2023.

12.4 To consider an update on Luxfords Restaurant

Members were pleased to receive this report. The Town Clerk clarified the figures within the report from the quarterly stocktake. Members thought that the target Average Transaction Value (ATV) needed to be reviewed to reflect inflation, and members wondered how we compared in terms of menu prices in the town. The Town Clerk advised that when we reviewed prices, staff explored the food costs of specific dishes and compared the price of those dishes with competitors.

The meeting closed at 9.00pm.