



**WISBECH TOWN COUNCIL**  
**POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE**

**7 NOVEMBER 2016 – 7.30 pm**

**MINUTES OF MEETING**

**Present:** Councillor Tierney, Chairman; Councillors Balsevics, Mrs Bucknor, Miss Hoy, Human, Oliver, Miss Oliver and Tibbs.

**Apologies:** None.

**Public Participation:** None requested.

The minutes of the meeting of the Policy and Resources Committee held on 11 July 2016 were confirmed and signed.

**R7/16 Audit of Accounts 2015/16**

Further to minute 14/16, the Clerk presented to members the report of the external auditor in respect of the Wisbech Town Council's accounts for 2015/16.

The Clerk informed members that the external auditor had stated that "on the basis of the annual return, in our opinion the information in the annual return is in accordance with proper practices and no matters have come to our attention giving cause for concern that relevant legislation and regulatory requirements have not been met". This means that the recommendations made by the external auditor in relation to audit of the council's annual accounts for 2014/15 in connection with the need for the council to review its risk management arrangements and its Financial Regulations had been addressed to the satisfaction of the external auditor during the financial year 2015/16.

Members considered the appointment of an internal auditor for audit of the council's 2016/17 accounts.

The Clerk informed members that the company which undertook the internal audit of the council's 2015/16 accounts (and had done so for a number of previous years), Canalbs Ltd, is willing to do likewise for the 2016/17 accounts.

Members decided, on the proposal of Councillor Oliver, seconded by Councillor Tibbs, that

- (1) the outcome of the external audit of the council's 2015/16 accounts be noted;
- (2) Canalbs Ltd be appointed as the council's internal auditor for the 2016/17 audit of accounts.

**R8/16 Wisbech Town Council's Accounts 2016/17**

The Clerk reported to members on the council's financial position as at the end of quarter two (half-year) of the financial year 2016/17; he gave explanations as to variations between the estimated income and expenditure for the second quarter of 2016/17 and the actual financial position as at 30 September 2016.

As at 30 September 2016, the council had received 52.7% of the estimated annual income and incurred 53.3% of its estimated annual expenditure.



The Clerk responded to members' questions.

Members decided, on the proposal of Councillor Balsevics, seconded by Councillor Tibbs, that

- (1) the information reported by the Clerk be noted;
- (2) the accounts for the second quarter of the financial year 2016/17 be approved.

### **R9/16 Budget 2017/18**

Members undertook preliminary discussions regarding the setting of a Wisbech Town Council budget for the financial year 2017/18.

Members used the 2016/17 budget (considered at minute R7/16 above) as the starting point for a 2017/18 budget and then took into account known and estimated additional costs, as well as anticipated reductions in income which the council would for could face in future financial years.

The Clerk presented a report which drew members' attention to a number of matters relevant to the setting of a budget (and Parish Precept) for the financial year 2017/18, including:

- that the council currently possesses no specific budget for repair and maintenance of the Town Hall and that the Assets Management Committee wishes to take a proactive approach to preserving and enhancing all of the council's assets. Obviously, the extent of such work/activity is dependent upon the level of budget availability.
- a significant saving had been made, as a result of negotiations by the Clerk, in the level of insurance premium now paid by the council.
- a recent event has led to public interest in the adequacy of the arrangements for access to the Town Hall. The council may wish to consider an assessment of such; if that were to happen and, as a result, the need for additional works were identified, funding would need to be made available by the council to meet the cost of such works.
- Wisbech Town Council had included in its budget for 2016/17 the sum of £17,453.00 to meet the cost of keeping the County Council street lights in Wisbech illuminated between 12 midnight and 6.00 am; however, as a result of the County Council's decision to reduce the "switch-off" to the period of 2.00 am to 6.00 am, the cost which would fall upon Wisbech Town Council would reduce to £11,222.30 (minute 162/15 (1) refers). The council agreed at minute 55/16 that part of the "surplus" budget allocation be used as Wisbech Town Council's contribution towards the costs of Cambridgeshire ACRE undertaking the management and administration required for the five years of the Community Led Local Development programme.
- The Valuation Office Agency (VOA) is currently undertaking a review of Business Rates; draft rateable values, to be effective from 1 April 2017, had been published on the VOA's website; it is possible that the overall rates bill faced by council may reduce by approximately £2,000.
- There would need to be an increase in the council's Grants budget if it wishes to approve a request from the Wisbech and Fenland Museum for additional grant funding from this council from the financial year 2017/18.

The Clerk reminded members of the importance of the council possessing an appropriate level of financial reserves and informed members of that, according to the Practitioners' Guide to Local Council Governance, it is recommended that a local council should possess, as general reserves, a sum equating to three to twelve months of its gross annual expenditure; in the case of Wisbech Town Council, that would be a sum (in addition to any ear-marked reserves) of between £88,000 and £351,000.

The Clerk reminded members also that the council currently has, in addition to its general reserves, the following two earmarked reserves:



- (1) £13,000 for development works to Wisbech Market Place
- (2) £15,000 to fund the cost of backdating salary payments to 1 August 2014 (for the financial years 2014/15 and 2015/16) in relation to the job evaluation exercise agreed at minute S6/14.

With regard to (2) above, it is looking likely that it will be necessary to add a further £9,000 to this reserve (for salary payments attributable to the financial year 2016/17). It will also be necessary to increase the salaries budget by £10,000 for financial year 2017/18 (on the assumption that the job evaluation exercise is concluded by 1 April 2017). The Leader and the Clerk explained the reasons for the delay in concluding the job evaluation exercise.

To assist members' deliberations, the Clerk mentioned also that the council's 2016/17 Precept is £235,554.00, to which the District Council added £36,849.00 in Council Tax Support Grant. As was reported to council at minute 48/16 (2), the Council Tax Support Grant (CTSG) received from Fenland District Council would be phased out over the next three financial year and that, consequently, CTSG payment to Wisbech Town Council for 2017/18 would be reduced to £24,566.00 (it would reduce to £12,283.00 in 2018/19 and cease in 2019/20).

The Clerk informed members also

- that the estimated 2017/18 Council Tax base for Wisbech is 6,149 Band D equivalent properties; the total number of chargeable dwellings, of which 4,109 are within Band A, is 7,950.
- of the Parish Precepts set by all of the local councils in Fenland for 2016/17, which range from £32.19 to £86.06 (the figure for Wisbech is £39.10).
- that, according to research undertaken by the Department for Communities and Local Government, the national average Parish Precept set by a local council in 2016/17 is £57.40 (an average increase of 6.1% over the 2015/16 figure).
- that every 1.0% increase in the council's current level of Precept generates approximately £2,355 in income.
- that there is currently no capping applied to Parish Precepts; however, the Government has indicated, through its consultation paper "The 2017/18 Local Government Finance Settlement", that it is minded to apply referendum principles to larger, higher-spending Town and Parish Councils with effect from 2017/18. Consequently, the Government is proposing that referendum principles be for Town and Parish Councils which have a Band D Precept higher than that of the lowest charging district council for 2016/17 (£75.46) and which have a total Precept for 2016/17 of at least £500,000; those councils would have face the same referendum principles as shire districts (that is increases of less than 2% or up to and including £5.00 (whichever is the higher) can be set without triggering a referendum). If this were to be implemented, following the consultation exercise (which closed on 28 October), it could be that the Government then looks at lowering the criteria to a level which could have an effect upon the ability of this council to raise its Precept by more than 1.99%.

The Clerk responded to members' questions in relation to the information that he had reported.

Councillor Miss Hoy commented that the combined savings in relation to the costs for insurance, street lighting and business rates would almost offset the reduction in Council Tax Support Grant. She mentioned also, in response to a question from Councillor Mrs Bucknor, that the Clerk is investigating possible options for the funding of a business case report in relation to the council's potential acquisition of Wisbech Castle (minute 60/16 refers).

Councillor Mrs Bucknor expressed the opinion that the council should be mindful of the amount of money that it spends on community events and festivals and that sponsorship opportunities in that regard should be explored. In addition, she commented that the council ought to be making financial provision for repairs and maintenance of the Town Hall and the public toilets owned by the council,



as well as ensuring that the council would be able to fund the cost of any works to the Town Hall which could arise from a disability access survey.

Councillor Oliver commented that the council is already mindful of the matters raised by Councillor Mrs Bucknor.

Members decided, on a proposal by Councillor Oliver, seconded by Councillor Tierney, that

- (1) the Clerk would produce a draft budget for the financial year 2017/18, for consideration by 9 January 2017 meeting this committee, on the basis of making provision for the areas of additional spending identified by members (increase in the level of grant funding, an increase in the salaries budget to fund the outcome of the job evaluation exercise, the introduction of a repairs and maintenance budget for the Town Hall) but aiming to minimise, through seeking to identify reductions in other areas of spending, the level of increase in the Precept;
- (2) a disability access survey of Wisbech Town Hall be undertaken, following which the council would consider if any works would be required to ensure that the council is able to meet both its legal obligations and the needs of its service-users;
- (3) the job evaluation exercise be completed by the Clerk and the Leader of the Council by the end of January 2017.

**Meeting finished at 9.00 pm.**

Signed.....

Dated .....