

**MINUTES OF THE VIRTUAL MEETING OF THE WANTAGE TOWN COUNCIL
HELD ONLINE USING ZOOM, ON MONDAY 12 OCTOBER 2020, AT 7.30 P.M.**

Councillors present: Councillor Major J Sibbald (Town Mayor)
Councillors I R Cameron A Crawford, A Duveen,
A Gilhome, J Goodman, J T Hannaby,
E L Johnson, A C Menzies, P O'Leary,
I L Sheldon and C H Wills-Wright.

Others present: Three members of the public

Clerk: W P Falkenau.
Deputy Clerk: S Sanders

Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors O C Curley, A Dunford and C Walters.

Declarations of disclosable pecuniary interests

None.

Minutes of the Council meeting held on 24 August 2020

The minutes were approved.

37. Statements and questions from the public

Mrs Mabberley asked the following questions:

1. Is there any reason why the latest financial reports on the website are for the year 2015/16?
2. The latest governance statement published is for 2018/19, is there not a later one available?
3. I seem to remember that at the last PM&F meeting an amount in the bank of some £800,000 was mentioned but I don't see it in the minutes of the meeting, should it be there?
4. In the statement, the first declaration states that "we have put in place arrangements for effective financial management". At the moment as the annual budget of the Town Council is still under €500,000, I believe that the council can benefit from the Financial Services Compensation Scheme. I note that the idea of spreading the funds between accounts was first discussed in the PM&F meeting on 11 March 2019 but that after the checking the minutes of every meeting since that date it appears that no action has yet been taken. As the pandemic is likely to increase the possibility of any financial institution failing, is the Council not negligent or are Councillors personally liable, if Town Council Monies are lost by not keeping balances under the £75,000 or €85,000 limit?

Mrs Mabberley agreed to provide a written copy of her questions. It was agreed that the Clerk should provide a written reply (see attached). **Action: Clerk**

38. Matters arising from the Council meeting held on 3 and 24 August 2020.

None.

39. Minutes of the Planning Committee meetings held on 3 and 24 August, and 21 September 2020.

ON THE PROPOSITION of Councillor Sibbald
SECONDED BY Councillor Sheldon
IT WAS RESOLVED that the minutes be adopted.

40. Minutes of the Leisure and Amenities Committee meeting held on 14 September 2020

ON THE PROPOSITION of Councillor Hannaby
SECONDED BY Councillor Johnson
IT WAS RESOLVED that the minutes be adopted

41. Minutes of the Promotion, Communications and Events Committee meeting held on 5 October 2020.

15 a) Artisan markets. The Town Centre Manager had engaged with the District Council and no definitive response had been received other than to propose that a Covid-19 risk assessment be prepared.

ON THE PROPOSITION OF Councillor Crawford
SECONDED BY Councillor Hannaby
IT WAS RESOLVED to proceed with the artisan markets unless the response from the District Council to the risk assessment, and other matters, raised valid issues that could not be addressed.

ON THE PROPOSITION OF Councillor Wills-Wright
SECONDED BY Councillor Menzies
IT WAS RESOLVED that the minutes, as amended, be adopted.

42. Minutes of the Policy, Management and Finance Committee meeting held on 28 September 2020

ON THE PROPOSITION OF Councillor Crawford
SECONDED BY Councillor Hannaby
IT WAS RESOLVED that the minutes be adopted.

43. To consider proposal to install winter floral displays in the town centre.

The summer displays were due to be removed within the next few days. The supplier had advised that winter displays could be supplied to cover the period to when the summer displays would be installed next year.

ON THE PROPOSITION OF Councillor Gilhome
SECONDED BY Councillor Hannaby
IT WAS RESOLVED to proceed with a contract for the provision of winter floral displays in the town centre at a cost of £2,100.

44. Consideration of arrangements for 2020/21 internal audit.

The Clerk had been contacted by the internal auditor about conducting an interim audit. The Town Council had not formally appointed the internal auditor for the current year. The internal auditor was proposing engagement terms that were the same as last year.

ON THE PROPOSITION OF Councillor Crawford
SECONDED BY Councillor Sheldon

IT WAS RESOLVED to appoint Mr Rose of IAC Audit as the Council's internal auditor for the year 2020/21 on the same terms as for the previous year.

45. District and County Councillors' reports.

District Council

The District Council had adopted an emergency budget to cope with the deficit arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. The government was proposing to scrap S106 contributions and CIL, and replace it with a National Infrastructure Levy. This would be payable at the end of a development construction rather than at the beginning of, or during, the construction period. The government was consulting on proposals to create planning zones where planning approval would be automatic without any democratic scrutiny. Powers of enforcement relating to Covid-10 regulations had been delegated to the District Council, as well as responsibility for delivery of food parcels should a lockdown be re-imposed. Test and trace duties were also being delegated to the District Council.

County Council

The County Councillors were pressing for improvements to cycling routes and had requested a review of the M4/A34 diversionary routes with a view to avoiding re-routing through Wantage. The re-opening of Grove station was still under consideration. More work was being done on health issues. The County Council cabinet was considering a proposal to undertake civil parking enforcement the following day.

ON THE PROPOSITION OF Councillor Sibbald
SECONDED BY Councillor Gilhome

IT WAS RESOLVED TO advise the District Council that the Town Council was aware that about a year ago its Scrutiny Committee had been asked to seek a review of the M4/A34 diversionary routes but so far this had not happened. The Clerk was to write to the District Council seeking a progress update. **Action: Clerk**

46. Town Mayor's communications.

The Town Mayor's communications were available to view on the Town Council's Website.

The meeting closed at 8.10 p.m.

WPF

19 October 2020

Response to questions raised under agenda item 37 at Council meeting on 12 October 2020

Please see the responses to your questions below, in italics.

Questions for the Town Council Meeting 12 October 2020

- 1. Is there any reason why the latest financial reports on the website are for the year 2015/16?**

Since the website was revamped in 2016, financial reports have been presented under the page "Accounting, Governance and Statutory Information" The page you refer to on the website hasn't been actively used or updated since the website was revamped, and should not have been on display. The page has now been removed from the website. Your question 2 indicates that you have accessed and viewed the "Accounting, Governance and Statutory Information" page and therefore you might have observed financial reports (Accounting Statements) for 2018/19, which are included under the document "Annual Governance and Accounting Statements 2018/19.

At some stage the website page "Accounting, Governance and Statutory Information" had been inadvertently relegated to a sub-menu, making it less prominent for visitors to the website. It has now been moved to the main menu.

- 2. The latest governance statement published is for 2018/19, is there not a later one available?**

The governance statement for 2019/20 was attached to the "Notice of public rights and publication of unaudited Annual Governance & Accountability Return" that was published on 5 August 2020 under the website main menu item "Notices". The menu item "Accounting, Governance and Statutory Information" has now been updated to include "Annual Governance and Accounting Statements 2019/20"

All the statements for 2019/20 are deemed unaudited. Normally, the external auditor would clear the statements by the end of September. Due to Covid-19 the deadline for the preparation of statements and external audit has been put back by two months.

- 3. I seem to remember that at the last PM&F meeting an amount in the bank of some £800,000 was mentioned but I don't see it in the minutes of the meeting, should it be there?**

Lots of different matters are mentioned at meetings. The purpose of minutes is not to record verbatim discussions, but to record decisions or recommendations made. In recording decisions or recommendations, it is the practice to attempt to provide sufficient narrative to give some insight into how the decision or recommendation was derived. There was no decision or recommendation made at the PM&F meeting about the "amount in the bank" and therefore it has not been mentioned in the minutes.

- 4. In the statement, the first declaration states that "we have put in place arrangements for effective financial management".
At the moment as the annual budget of the Town Council is still under €500,000, I believe that the council can benefit from the Financial Services Compensation Scheme.**

I note that the idea of spreading the funds between accounts was first discussed in the PM&F meeting on 11 March 2019 but that after the checking the minutes of every meeting since that date it appears that no action has yet been taken.

As the pandemic is likely to increase the possibility of any financial institution failing, is the Council not negligent or are Councillors personally liable, if Town Council Monies are lost by not keeping balances under the £75,000 or €85,000 limit?

The statement made above is not wholly correct. You will note from the minute extracts quoted below that between the 9 March 2020 and the 8 June 2020 the headings change from "Update on investigation of better interest rates on the Council's cash deposits" to "Update on opening accounts with financial institutions". This change reflects the adoption of a "Treasury and Investment Policy" on 22 March 2020 (see the "Accounting, Governance and Statutory Information" website page). Prior to this, the action was to try to secure investments that offered better interest rates than those currently provided by the financial institutions serving the Town Council. The search, over the period March 2019 to March 2020, to find other institutions offering better interest rates was unsuccessful.

The decision to spread funds across various financial institutions coincided with the start of the Covid-19 lockdown on 23 March 2020. This has made it more difficult to engage with financial institutions. Most online applications for institutions do not cater for parish councils. They require information that is not applicable and therefore do not allow an application to proceed. Telephone contacts have also been problematic, with many call/business centres being closed down. Many institutions are currently not accepting the opening of accounts eg HSBC, TSB, Following the recent PM&F meeting the chairman put forward a Swedish bank to contact. The response from the institution is to be referred to the next PM&F committee meeting, but it advised that it would only accept a minimum deposit of £250k. The outcome of approaches to other institutions will be reported to the next PM&F Committee meeting on 9 November.

Given the unique circumstances being created by the pandemic, I do not believe the Council would be regarded as negligent or the councillors personally liable should one of the institutions it currently uses fail.

Extracts from Minutes:

Update on opening accounts with financial institutions (PM&F 28/9/2020)

The Chairman had given the Clerk details of a bank to contact. The Clerk was to progress this. Action: Clerk

Update on opening accounts with financial institutions (PM&F 20/7/2020)

With the easing of Covid-19 restrictions the Clerk hoped to obtain signatures from Councillors in order to proceed with opening accounts. Action: Clerk

Update on opening accounts with financial institutions (PM&F 8/6/2020)

The Clerk had not yet progressed the opening of accounts. The lockdown made it difficult to get the sign offs required. Action: Clerk

Update on investigation of better interest rates on the Council's cash deposits (PM&F 9/3/2020)

The proposal to place funds across a number of institutions, so that no one institution held more than the amount protected under guarantee, was incorporated into the Treasury and Investment Policy under agenda item 78 e) below. Interest received would be dependent upon the rates offered by each institution. Action: Clerk

Update on investigation of better interest rates on the Council's cash deposits (PM&F 27/1/2020)

This was still under investigation. It would be affected by the proposal to place funds across a number of institutions, so that no one institution held more than £85,000, the amount protected under guarantee. Action: Clerk

Update on investigation of better interest rates on the Council's cash deposits (PM&F 11/11/2019)

Other than pursuing the policy of depositing funds with the Nationwide, the Clerk had been unable to identify better interest rates from other institutions. The Chairman advised that the District Council was not currently in a position to provide the service with regard to securing better interest rates. Action: Clerk

Update on investigation of better interest rates on the Council's cash deposits (PM&F 30/9/2019)

The Clerk had been unable to identify any suitable accounts with higher interest rates. He advised that if the Council wished to secure higher interest rates on its deposits, it would be appropriate for it to seek the advice of an Independent Financial Advisor. In order to give some protection to its funds, the Council had previously agreed that longer term deposits should be made with the Nationwide Building Society. The Clerk was to arrange for this policy to be pursued. Action: Clerk

The Chairman was to investigate whether the District Council might be able to provide a service to the parish councils with regard to holding cash deposits. Action: Chairman

Update on investigation of better interest rates on the Council's cash deposits (PM&F 15/7/2019)

The Clerk had not yet been able to progress this. Action: Clerk

Investigation of better interest rates on the Council's cash deposits. (PM&F 10/6/2019)

The Clerk had not yet been able to progress this. The Clerk was to arrange to funds to be moved from the Co-op bank account to Barclays and Nationwide who maintain the £85,000 financial protection.

Action: Clerk

Item 66 Financial Statements to March 2019 (PM&F 11/3/2019)

The Financial Statements were considered. There were a number of areas where expenditure had been delayed or would not occur and this was increasing the Council's reserves. The Clerk agreed to investigate again whether better interest rates on the Council's banking deposits could be achieved. Action: Clerk

WP Falkenau
Clerk