



FINANCE COMMITTEE MEETING

Tuesday 15th October 2013 at 7.00pm
The Studio, Haverhill Arts Centre, High Street

Present: **Chair: Town Councillor: R André**
Town Councillors: M Byrne, P Hanlon and C Turner

Two members of the public were present

MINUTES

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence had been received from Cllr Ager.

2. Declarations of Interest

No Members declared an interest in items on the agenda.

3. Minutes of the Last Meeting held 18th June 2013

The minutes of the meeting held 18th June 2013 were agreed as a true record, subject to deletion of reference to Cllrs Russo and J Stroud from item 1.

4. Matters Arising

The Town Clerk reported that Suffolk County Council had been advised of the delay in the proposed use of funding from former County Councillor French's locality budget.

The Clerk had looked into the cost of a licence to hold weddings at the Arts Centre. The cost was likely to be in the region of £500 for a licence lasting a minimum of three years. There were some issues to address in the use of the venue for weddings, particularly the lack of an outdoor area to the rear. The Clerk said he would continue to progress this matter.

5. Current Financial Position

The Town Clerk summarised the accounts for Haverhill Town Council and Hartseats Ltd. Members noted the financial position as at 30 September 2013. The Clerk agreed to include a budget figure for subjective code 4051 (Community Budget Support) for the next meeting.

6. Issues for 2014/15 Budget

Councillors considered issues for the 2014/15 budget and made the following points:

- Cllr Byrne asked the Clerk to obtain details of how a referendum on Council Tax rises might be triggered.
- Cllr Turner suggested a 0% rise in Council Tax, and that efforts should be made to raise income in other ways.

Action

TOWN CLERK

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- Cllr Byrne said that the Council's reserves should be sustained and protected. She said that she would support an increase of up to 3.96% to protect against the impact of the withdrawal of the Council Tax Support Grant by St Edmundsbury Borough Council, unless other savings could be identified or the Borough Council reversed its decision.
- Cllr Hanlon suggested that there was a need to look at a rise in Council Tax to protect against cuts in services, ahead of any decision to impose referendum legislation on the Town Council
- Cllr Turner asked Cllr Byrne if she felt that it would be better to raise Council Tax now, to protect against the cut imposed by the Borough Council. Cllr Byrne said that there were dangers involved in any other course of action. The rise would be less than 10p per week, which was not a lot to pay for the continued provision of services, and those in hardship would receive financial support and may not have to pay Council Tax at all.
- Cllr Turner asked the Clerk whether interest on the Council's balances was likely to continue at its current high level. The Clerk said that this was very unlikely. An increased return in this financial year was due to the maturing of a long term investment that had been established at a time when rates were relatively high.
- Cllr André said that councillors should recognise the need to look not only at next year, but also at years beyond that.
- Cllr Turner asked that, when the budget was presented for approval, figures for a 2.5% and 5% rise should be included for comparison.

Councillors agreed that a budget should be drafted for further consideration, based on a Council Tax increase of up to 3.96% to protect against the impact of the withdrawal of the Council Tax Support Grant by St Edmundsbury Borough Council, unless other savings could be identified or the Borough Council reversed its decision.

TOWN CLERK

7. Property Acquisition and Management

Councillors received a verbal update on the acquisition of the former Police Station and Magistrates Court site, and on the recent vacation of Bevan House. The Clerk reported that a recent meeting with the County Council had been positive, and that a draft lease for the Courts site was expected shortly. Initial findings by the surveyor had highlighted the possibility of having to replace the heating system, and that this could prove very costly. The Clerk also advised that Bevan House was now in the Council's full control following the ending of the Red Cross' lease. Options for the future were to use the site as part of a possible deal with the County Council for the Magistrates Courts, to offer to a new leaseholder, to sell on the open market, or to retain for community use, although this would be financially challenging. The building was being made available for individual hires, and one interested party had been identified for a possible ongoing use.

Councillors commented on the Magistrates Court site as follows:

- Cllrs Hanlon and Turner said that a green energy consultant should be involved, and that grants should be sought to help with a replacement heating system
- Cllr Byrne said that the County Council should make good the site before leasing or selling it to the Town Council
- Cllr André said that the Council should consider the full survey report when received, but that there should be no further delays

Councillors commented on Bevan House as follows:

- Cllr Turner said that the property could be of use to St John Ambulance as a training facility
- Cllr André said that flexibility was needed to allow the building to be used in negotiations for the Magistrates Court site

Cllr Turner also said that the Town Council should reiterate its expression of support for the group looking to restore the Corn Exchange, but should make clear that there would be no financial support. Cllr Byrne said that no commitment had been given, and the Clerk confirmed this. What had been offered was a further discussion at the Town Council, if – and only if – a robust and sustainable business case could be produced by the group.

8. Closure

The meeting was closed at 8.15pm.