

Minutes of a meeting of the **FINANCE** Committee held at **GROOMBRIDGE OLD STATION** on **Monday 4th December 2023 at 7pm**

PRESENT: Councillors Nick Anderson, Robert Gordon-James, Diana Kelly, Penny Lawne, Deviani Parekh-Jones, Linsey Winter (Chair)
In attendance: Debbie Siddle – Clerk

Members of the public are encouraged to attend the meetings and there is a 10-minute opportunity at the start of the meeting for them to address the Council. There were no members of the public present.

1. **ENQUIRE WHETHER ANYONE PRESENT INTENDS TO FILM, PHOTOGRAPH AND/OR RECORD THE MEETING** - none.
2. **APOLOGIES** - Cllr Andrew Fane - family commitment
3. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST** – Cllr Gordon-James for item 6.1 (personal interest), 6.2 (Director of Withyham Parish Community Interest Company). He is also the letting agent for Pheonix House on a no fee basis and there is no pecuniary or prejudicial interest.

4. MINUTES

4.1 Minutes of the meeting held on 25th September 2023

002608

RESOLVED to adopt the minutes of the meeting held on 25th September 2023, which were duly signed by the Chairman.

4.2 Matters outstanding from these minutes:

Completed actions from previous minutes

Page No	Who	Action
Pg.2732	Clerk	Parish Maintenance Person to undertake repointing in better weather
Pg 2812	PMP	Mended leak from drainpipe/hopper
Pg 2814	Clerk	Confirmed number of meetings remaining in financial year.
Pg 2814	Clerk	Promoted WPC grants programme
002566	Clerk	Bank account details received to pay grant of £800 to wild Groombridge
002567	Clerk	Implemented the updated Parish Maintenance Person Risk Assessment
Pg 2816	RGJ/Clerk	Leak in roof at Pheonix House mended under Clerk's delegated authority
002569	Clerk	Moved to Income and Expenditure reporting
Pg 2817	Clerk	Quotes for hedge laying and cutting lime trees at Groombridge Recreation Ground agreed by Council

Outstanding items from previous meetings

Page No	Who	Action
Pg. 2002	Clerk	Pursue free opportunities for advertising the meeting rooms
Pg.2733	Clerk	Produce 2 year budget after work is undertaken on the next Parish Plan 2024-2028
Pg. 2792	Clerk	Order replacement goal for Teasley Mead

Pg. 2794	Clerk	Replace bench at Youth Shelter with a memorial bench
Pg 2812	Clerk	Contact alternative streetlighting contractor

Actions from this meeting

Page No	Who	Action
	Clerk	Respond regarding CIL funds request
	Planning Committee	Consider changes to CIL policy to make it more clear and transparent
	Clerk	Recommend a subsidy of £18,000 for 2024/25 to Council
	Cllr Gordon-James	Directors to be made aware that WPC would like to see the subsidy request decreasing in future years and accompanied by a full report/application
	Building Asset Group	Consider a full list of expenditure on Pheonix House and Groombridge Old Station
	Clerk	Recommend budget and Precept of £225,641 to Council
	Clerk	Review Earmarked reserves closer to the new financial year
	Clerk	Fixed Electrical Services to undertake works for condensation issues at Phoenix House
	Clerk	Instruct JAKK to repair the Victoria fingerpost
	Clerk	Set up an account with Unity Trust Bank
	Clerk	Apply for an HSBC business deposit card
	Clerk	Notify Council of requirement at audit to check that councillors are using Council email addresses
	Clerk	Recommend the updated Grass, Hedge & Tree Policy to Council
	Clerk	Recommend the updated Bank Reconciliations Procedure to Council
	Cllr Gordon-James	Obtain two more quotes for Phoenix House roof
	Cllr Gordon-James	Seek advice from a surveyor about Phoenix House roof

5. GRANTS**5.1 Review expenditure to date for 2023/24**

It was noted that there is £3,319 remaining in budget for activities in 2023/24. It is likely that applications to future meetings in this financial year will be for the 2024/25 budget.

5.2 Consider any Grant applications received

No applications had been received for this meeting.

6. OTHER REQUESTS FOR FUNDING**6.1 Consider request for funds from Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) and review policy for use of CiL monies**

A request had been received to use Community Infrastructure Levy (CiL) funds for upgrading of the surfacing of Back Lane bridge. The Committee agreed that the

request does not meet the criteria for CIL as the land is not owned or maintained by Withyham Parish Council and CIL monies enable the Parish Council to achieve its goals set out in the Parish Plan. It was felt that the WPC Grants programme was more appropriate as that is open access, but that it was not possible to guarantee success should an application be received.

The Committee also AGREED that Planning committee should be asked to review the CIL policy to ensure that it is clear and transparent.

6.2 Consider and agree 2024/25 subsidy request from WPCIC for Groombridge Post Office

Withyham Parish Community Interest Company had requested £18,000 subsidy for 2024/25. WPCIC Directors had confirmed that this level of subsidy was required based on their cashflows and that, if it transpired that they did not require the full amount then the subsidy could be reduced in following years.

The Directors were exploring ways to reduce Corporation Tax which would reduce the subsidy requirement, and Cllr Gordon-James would check that the subsidy level was not impacting Corporation Tax.

Committee members recognised that WPC had made an ongoing commitment to providing subsidy in order to keep Groombridge Post Office operating and AGREED to recommend a subsidy of £18,000 for 2024/25 to Council.

The Committee asked that the Directors be made aware that WPC would like to see the request decreasing in future years, and any future subsidy applications should be accompanied by a full report to explain the level of the request.

It was noted that Council would be receiving a quarterly update report to its December meeting.

7. BUDGET AND PRECEPT (2024/25)

7.1 To receive cashflow to end of 2024/25 to demonstrate projected Reserves

A cashflow had been circulated prior to the meeting and the Committee noted the projected year end carry forward figure (General Reserves) of £52,216. The Clerk drew the Committee's attention to the internal auditor's concerns that WPC's general reserves were in danger of becoming too low.

7.2 To consider the budget for 2024/25, and Precept required (to recommend to Council)

The Committee had received detailed papers prior to the meeting advising on each budget line for 2024/25, and a proposed line by line budget.

The Committee agreed that WPC should not underestimate expected expenditure as General Reserves could not be further eroded after recent large projects to save Groombridge Post Office and deliver the new playground, and that the papers demonstrated that projected expenditure on budget lines was being closely budgeted.

The Post Office roof potentially requires extensive works and further quotes are needed. The Committee confirmed therefore that sufficient budgeting should be allowed in 2024/25 for this as Reserves would be insufficient to cover it; if the full funds were not needed for the roof then they could be retained in Earmarked Reserves for future asset requirements.

In terms of monitoring, the Building Asset Group were asked to consider a full list of expenditure on Pheonix House and Groombridge Old Station to date.

The Committee asked that Council should receive the same recommendations as them but that budget line 5200 should show £5,000 and the Earmarked Reserves Assets line a further £35,000 from Precept.

This resulted in budgeted 2024/25 expenditure of £274,160 and expected income of £48,519. This leaves a gap of £225,641 to find from Precept.

In 2023/24 the Precept was £170,834. The difference between £170,384 and £225,641 is £54,807 which represents a 32.1% increase. The provisional tax base for 2024/25 has not yet been confirmed but, based on the 2023/24 figure of 1,334, a precept of £225,641 would be £169.15, an increase of £41.09 (79p per week).

The Committee recognised that this is a higher increase than in past years but that it was necessary to meet the obligations of WPC without causing Reserves to fall too low. Should any residents enquire about the increase the Clerk would be able to provide them with information.

002609 RESOLVED to recommend the above budget, and Precept of £225,641 to Council.

7.3 To provisionally consider the Ear-marked Reserves for 2024/25

This would be reviewed closer to the new financial year.

8. PARISH COUNCIL ASSETS

8.1 Consider structural testing of goal posts at Groombridge Recreation Ground

The summer ROSPA inspection of equipment at Groombridge Recreation Ground recommended structural tests of the goal posts.

September Finance Committee received a quote of £500+VAT from RoSPA to undertake the tests and asked the Clerk for costings for replacement goals and to investigate if there is anything the Parish Maintenance Person could do to offset the issues raised in the ROSPA report.

The Clerk reported to this meeting that structural or load tests of goals are specific strength and stability tests so could not be substituted by works by the Parish Maintenance Person. A like for like replacement of the goals would be around £1,200 for the pair.

The Committee noted that the initial ROSPA report showed this action as a medium risk and there were no specific issues highlighted. The current goals are around 6 to 7 years old. The Committee AGREED that as there is no high risk currently no action would be taken. Should a future report show high risk the goals would be removed. It was noted that there is no budget for replacements.

8.2 Consider works to address condensation in Phoenix House lobby

Condensation continues to be an issue in the hallway at Phoenix House and the double-glazed window has not solved this. It was confirmed that a small heater and extractor fan were being proposed as a dehumidifier would not be sufficient.

The Committee noted that just one quote had been received but recognised that it is necessary to undertake the works as soon as possible.

002610 RESOLVED that Martin & Co should instruct Fixed Electrical Services on behalf of WPC to complete the works as quoted at £820.

Budget line 5101 to be used, £450 from EMR Phoenix House and £370 General Reserves.

8.3 Consider quotes for repairs to Victoria fingerpost

One of the fingers on the Victoria finger post had been damaged and required repair. Quotes had been provided by JAKK and BW Patience & Sons which had been shared with the Committee.

002611 RESOLVED to instruct JAKK to repair the Victoria fingerpost finger at £321.40.

8.4 Note disposals (bench near youth shelter and trailer)

Previous Finance and Council meetings had agreed these disposals. The Clerk confirmed that the bench near Groombridge youth shelter had been removed and would be replaced with a memorial bench and the trailer had been sold for £200. This was recorded in the Asset Register.

9. ACCOUNTS AND FINANCE

9.1 Review arrangements for third bank account

The Clerk had pursued WPC's instruction to set up a third bank account with Lloyds so that when Precept is received, funds could be moved to ensure that WPC's HSBC account does not exceed the £85,000 Financial Services Compensation Scheme limit. Lloyds had turned the application down and the Clerk recommended Unity Trust bank as an alternative as it is used by many Parish Councils.

002612 RESOLVED that an account should be set up with Unity Trust Bank with all members of Finance Committee on the bank mandate.

9.2 Agree application for HSBC Business deposit card

HSBC now requires a business deposit card to be used to deposit cash as WPC does not have a Debit card.

002613 RESOLVED to apply for an HSBC business deposit card.
Cllrs Winter and Parekh-Jones signed the form.

9.3 Receive and consider interim audit report

The interim audit report had been circulated prior to the meeting. The Clerk was thanked for another successful audit.

The Committee noted the new requirement at audit to check that councillors are using Council email addresses rather than personal ones. The Clerk was asked to raise this at Council.

10. POLICIES

10.1 Review Grass, Hedge & Tree Policy (epicormic growth)

An updated policy had been circulated prior to the meeting with a recommendation that cutting the epicormic growth of the Lime Trees at

Groombridge Recreation Ground should be done by contractors rather than volunteers. This followed agreements at the November Council meeting.

002614 RESOLVED to recommend the updated Grass, Hedge & Tree Policy to Council.

10.2 Bank Reconciliations Procedure

An updated policy had been circulated prior to the meeting with a recommendation that the Chair of Finance undertakes a spot check of payments at the same time as the reconciliation.

002615 RESOLVED to recommend the updated Bank Reconciliations Procedure to Council.

11. REPORT FROM RESPONSIBLE FINANCE OFFICER (RFO)

A quote had been received by Martin & Co to mend a small part of Phoenix House roof. The Committee could see the benefit of more minor work being undertaken if a leak was likely and a surveyor being asked to inspect while scaffolding was up to assess the health of the roof.

Cllr Gordon-James/Martin & Co were asked to obtain two more quotes and seek advice from a surveyor about this proposal.

12. MATTERS OF URGENT IMPORTANCE FOR NOTING OR INCLUSION ON A FUTURE AGENDA

The Clerk was asked to make Committee meetings 6.30pm where there is no Planning meeting beforehand.

11. DATE OF NEXT MEETING – agreed as Monday 22nd January 2024 at 7pm.

The meeting ended at 8.15pm