

Finance & Governance Committee

Present: Cllrs Banks, Cooper-Marsh, Goodman, Hitchin and Pitt.

Absent: Cllr Chapman, Collins, Kumar and Maslen

In attendance: Town Clerk, Responsible Finance Officer

Minutes of the meeting of the **Finance & Governance committee** held on **Tuesday 21st January** at **7.15pm** in the Eaton's Centre, The Maltings, St Neots, PE19 8ES.

Public Participation

There was one member of the public present who addressed the Council on agenda item 7. The resident raised concerns regarding the proposal to allocate £115,000 for transitioning operational vehicles to hybrid and electric models. They suggested prioritising replacing fuel-intensive diesel lawnmowers, which consume significantly more fuel than vehicles, instead of focusing on two vehicle replacements. They also recommended a phased approach, replacing one vehicle and mowers now while delaying additional vehicle replacements to allow for advancements in electric vehicle technology. They felt this strategy would better align with long-term carbon reduction goals and operational efficiency.

ACTIONS

098 Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received from Cllrs Chapman, Collins, Kumar and Maslen.

Admin

099 Declarations of Interest

Cllr Pitt commented that he is a Member of HDC Council but not part of the cabinet or decision-making process.

100 Minutes

RESOLVED to approve the minutes of the 10th December 2024 as a true and accurate record.

101 Payments

Members received and noted payments for November 2024.

102 Community Groups Annual Grant Funding

Cllr Banks declared an interest as a Trustee of the Pightle.

Cllr Pitt declared an interest as a Member of the Loves Farm Community Association.

Members received a report from the Town Clerk and RFO on the Council's awarding of allocated annual funding from the grants budget to Residents Associations for each of the areas in St Neots and community groups that maintain and manage public spaces. In 2016 the Council resolved that some specific residents' associations and Community Groups would be allocated grant funding without the need to apply. This process had continued, and the Town Clerk suggested that the Council draws up Service Level Agreements with the organisations. Members commented that a SLA may be an overburden based on the funding level and its use. There are costs associated with these groups include running costs, operational costs (i.e lawn mowers) management or maintenance costs, or in the case of Residents Associations allocating funding to others or local projects.



Members discussed reporting from organisations that receive annual allocated funding. It was felt that requesting reports on expenditure and activity for September can then be considered as part of budget setting for the following financial year.

RESOLVED to release allocated annual grant funding of £1,400 to the below organisations and that each organisation submits a report outlining use of funds, activities and future activity by the end of September 2025 to assist with budget setting.

- Eatons Community Association
- Loves Farm Community Association
- Wintringham Residents Association
- The Pightle Millenium Green Trust
- The Priory Park Friends Group

Cllr Banks and Pitt abstained from voting having declared an interest.

Members noted that funding allocated for Eynesbury Village Association would not be released as there was not currently an active association.

103 Council Building Energy Audits

Members received and considered a recommendation from the Operations and Amenities Committee on progressing recommendations arising from building audits as part of transitioning the Council's estate towards carbon net-zero. Chairperson of Operations and Amenities Committee presented the Committee's recommendations. It was explained that energy audits of Council owned and operated buildings had been undertaken resulting in several recommendations for reducing carbon output. A number of recommendations had been identified as 'quick wins'. These are quick to deliver actions at a low cost. The Environment and Emergency Committee and the Operations and Amenities Committee are recommending that these actions are delivered as a priority and that General Reserves of £5,300 are allocated. It was noted this cost was an estimate based on indicative figures provided by the energy surveys.

A Member commented that two of the buildings owned by the Council have occupants, one of which is a commercial organisation, and this should be considered when agreeing to fund actions that may be the responsibility of the tenant, such as changing bulbs as opposed to complete light fittings.

RESOLVED that carbon neutral actions identified by energy audits as 'quick wins' that can be progressed within existing revenue budgets are progressed by officers under delegated authority related to those budgets. **RESOLVED to RECOMMEND** that up to £5,300 is allocated from the Council's Community Buildings Earmarked Reserve to progress those actions for which there are no existing revenue budgets or insufficient funds in current year revenue budgets.

RESOLVED to RECOMMEND that for those buildings where the Council has tenants recommended actions which relate to the tenant's responsibilities are only progressed if paid for by the tenants. Actions for which a landlord is typically responsible are progressed by the Council.



104 Transition of Operational Vehicles to EV

The Chairperson of the Operations and Amenities Committee presented a recommendation from the Committee on the replacement of diesel vehicles with plug-in hybrid and electric alternatives. A Member thanked the resident who spoke under public participation and referred to a point made around investing in more electric lawnmowers as they have a greater diesel usage. It was explained that the reason one lawn mower was being recommended was that it would provide the Council to test and ascertain its longer-term effectiveness and capability by trialling across the Council's sites prior to investing more funds in other ride-on lawn mowers.

A Member queried type of plug-in hybrid vans and prices. Officers explained they had identified Ford Transit Customs as suitable options of which a number of second-hand models were available online within the budget proposed.

RESOLVED to RECOMMEND that the Council allocates of £115,000 for the replacement of diesel vehicles with plug-in hybrid and electric alternatives from the following funds:

- 1) £64,567 from the vehicles and lawnmower earmarked reserve.
- 2) £30,000 from the current year revenue budget for vehicles and lawnmowers.
- 3) £20,433 from the General Reserves.

RESOLVED to RECOMMEND that the Council approves the following vehicle replacements:

- 1) To replace the two oldest diesel vehicles (2010 Ford Ranger and 2013 Nissan Navara) with second-hand plug-in hybrid panel vans.
- 2) To replace one diesel ride-on lawn mower with new fully electric ride-on alternative (96" deck)
- 3) To purchase and install two charges for vehicles (EVs and Plug-ins, 7.2kW)
- 4) To purchase special charger for lawn mower batteries.

RESOLVED to RECOMMEND that the replaced vehicles (2010 Ford Ranger and 2013 Nissan Navara) are to be disposed of by sale on the open market or with any buying service or used for part-exchange when buying the replacement.

105 Oast Building Insurance

Members received a report from the Town Clerk outlining the costs of insuring the Oast building following the Council's purchase. Insurers had inspected the building and a number of actions had been undertaken by the Council's Operations Team to better protect the building and ensure all elements of the insurance policy are complied with.

RESOLVED to RECOMMEND that the Town Council approve an overspend of up to £5,244 in the Town Council's insurance budget due to the requirement to insure the Oast Building as vacant property following the purchase.

106 Oast Building Feasibility

Members received a report on progressing feasibility studies for developing uses of the Oast Building and to make a recommendation to the Full Council on the allocation



of funding. A Member spoke on the importance of early engagement with key heritage and planning authorities due to the nature of the building. Concerns were expressed that any feasibility or designs need early thinking around use of space in detailed way. Each option for the building will have its own needs and this will need to be carefully considered. The Council needs to be very specific in testing these robustly.

A Member commented that the Council should look across its departments and committees to look at different objectives and priorities that can help gather and release funding sources.

Members expressed concern over spending funds prior to engagement with the public. It was queried whether a heritage statement was needed at this point and could this cost be removed.

The Project Delivery Manager outlined the proposed approach and the reasons for the recommendation. It was explained that there would be a wide team of work, and the Council could look to appoint a working group to ensure involvement and collaboration. Due to the nature of the building a heritage statement was important and would help inform discussions with Historic England and the Local Planning Authority. A statement would be needed even for repair and maintenance work to the scheduled monument.

It is important not to develop ideas and raise expectations around options that are not feasible and physically deliverable. The work recommended will help look at key options to understand their feasibility and produce material for engagement with the public. These skills are not available to the Council 'in-house'. Part of this process will look at demand and need. Presenting the limitations of the building is important.

It was commented that there needs to be work done internally around options and space to help have constructive public discussions. A Member commented that the Council should gather all feedback and be clear about why we bought the building in the first place, what the constraints are and what the possibilities are.

It was proposed and seconded to approve the officer's recommendations.

A Member spoke regarding options on preferred contractor and the importance of ensuring a company is selected that will be able to work well with key bodies such as planning and heritage. Strong relationships with these bodies will be key in a successful project and address constraints around the building.

RESOLVED to RECOMMEND that the Council approve up to £25,500.00 (incl. contingency) in funding from the General Reserve to appoint an architect and conduct Step 1 of the proposed Project Plan which will focus on feasibility studies for final shortlisting of ideas for the Oast Building redevelopment.

107 Service Level Agreements

Members received and provided feedback on a draft Service Level Agreement template to be used as the basis for agreements with those organisations funding has



previously been identified for. The Town Clerk explained the KPIs and outcomes for individual organisations are currently being worked through and will be brought to the Committee in February. Any feedback on the wider points in the template Service Level Agreement document would be welcomed.

Members commented as follows;

- The committee would expect to see KPIs focuses on outputs agreed for the funding rather than outcomes that are difficult to measure.
- Understanding demand, backlog, waiting lists and where referrals are coming from for the services funded should be included in reports back to the Council.
- 14 days for a decision on reallocation of funds for an alternative use should be 30 days to allow for a meeting cycle of the Council.
- Under the section on unspent funds there should be inclusion that 'Funds must not be used for any other purpose.'
- In terms of monitoring and reporting a 6-month report at the time of the Council's budget setting process would hold more value to the Council and help the budgeting process. A report in September for the previous financial year was suggested.
- Correction of a typo on 'Pro rata'.
- End dates listed as 2025 should be 2026.

Members discussed whether the organisations receiving funds through an SLA would be eligible to also apply for funding through the Council's Grant Aid scheme. While Members acknowledged there may be specific capital projects that sit outside the services covered in the SLA that could be eligible for funding, this was not the intention of establishing SLAs and the Grant Aid policy. Concerns were raised that the Council could continue to be seen as a first resort for funding and that organisations should look for project funding elsewhere alongside funding through the SLAs.

The Clerk was asked to amend the draft SLA template to state service providers in and SLA agreement with the Council will not be able to apply for any additional grant income through the Council's Grant Aid scheme during that financial year unless under exceptional circumstances. Funding already provided through an active SLA would be taken into account when considering any such application, applications from other organisations and availability of funds.

108 Councillor Travel and Expenses Policy

Members received and considered amendments to the Councillor Travel and Expenses Policy. Members noted that amendments had been brought forward following a resolution by the Town Council that Councillors could claim expenses to use the St Neots Car Share Scheme to travel to and from meetings at the Eatons Centre. This is intended to be a temporary arrangement to address challenges in reaching council meetings for Members while meetings are held at the Eatons.

Members discussed the policy and put forward a number of proposed amendments.

RESOLVED to RECOMMEND that the Town Council adopt the draft Councillor Travel and Expenses Policy subject to the following amendments;



- Inclusion of St Neots Car Share Scheme expenses for a Councillor to return to their residence following a Council meeting at the Eatons Community Centre.
- 3.2 to include “any duty.the councillor is appointed to attend on behalf of the Council,...”
- 4.2 to include “authorised...in advance ...by the Town Clerk”
- 6.3 deletion of “This authorisation should be attached to your claim for reimbursement.” As this is not relevant in this section.
- 7.2 to include “...permission must be sought in advance in writing from the Town Clerk”
- To include “When the Clerk is unavailable the Deputy Clerk or RFO can fulfil the duties assigned to the Clerk”

109 **Date of Next Meeting**

Members noted that the date of the next scheduled Finance and Governance Committee meeting would be 18th February 2025 at 7:15pm.

110 **Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960 Exclusion of the press and the Public** **RECOMMENDED** In terms of Schedule 12a of the Local Government Act 1972, the following items will be likely to disclose exempt information relating to establishment and contractual matters and it is, therefore, **RECOMMENDED** that pursuant to the provisions of the Public Bodies (admissions to Meetings) Act 1960 the public and press be excluded.

111 **Priory Centre Lease**

Members received and considered a document from the Council’s appointed valuer and negotiator setting out a recommended response to Huntingdonshire District Council’s proposed Heads of Terms for the Priory Centre. The document set out three different options that addressed concerns raised by Members and put in place protections for the Council based on its current lease arrangements, values and future protections. Members discussed the document, commenting on the need to protect the facility and taxpayer.

A Member commented that they felt the options set out in the document were thorough and would do a good job in protecting the Council.

Members requested three changes to the document around; the reprovion of a facility in the event of a break clause being enacted, an amendment of wording around market value definition and inclusion of a clause on provision of access.

RESOLVED to RECOMMEND the three options for Priory Centre Lease Heads of Terms as set out and recommended by the Council’s appointed professional valuer as acceptable terms to the Council and to delegate that the Town Clerk obtain formal agreement of one of these options.

COMMITTEE CHAIRPERSON