



FARNHAM TOWN COUNCIL

C

Notes Strategy & Resources

Time and date

2.00 pm on Tuesday 16th January, 2024

Place

Council Chamber - Farnham Town Hall

Strategy & Resources Members Present:

Councillor David Beaman
Councillor Mat Brown
Councillor Alan Earwaker (ex-Officio)
Councillor Tony Fairclough
Councillor George Hesse
Councillor Andrew Laughton
Councillor Michaela Martin
Councillor Kika Mirylees
Councillor Graham White (Lead Member)

In attendance: Cllr George Murray
Cllr Chris Jackman (virtual)

Officers: Iain Lynch, Town Clerk , Jenny de Quervain, Planning and Civic Officer (part), Iain McCready Business and Facilities Manager.

1. Apologies

Apologies were received from Cllr Laughton for a late arrival.

2. Declarations of interest

A personal interest was received from Cllr Fairclough and Cllr Murray in relation to the Internal Auditor's report as they know him personally.

Cllr Beaman declared a pecuniary interest as a Trustee of Creative Response in relation to the item on grants..

3. Minutes

With the addition of Cllr Martin to the list of attendees, the Notes were agreed as a correct record.

4. Finance Report

Cllr White introduced the finance report at the 9 month period to the end of December noting that Income was running at 105% (which included some ringfenced CIL payments) whilst expenditure was running at 74%.

The Working Group reviewed the following documents to 31st December:

- Bank Reconciliation
- Income and Expenditure Report by account code and Committee
- Statement of Investments
- Reserves
- Outstanding aged debtors

In response to specific questions, the Town Clerk advised that Cemeteries income was unpredictable and there was usually an increase in activity in the final quarter. One non resident grave purchase and burial could be as much as £5,000 (50% reduction for residents).

In terms of advertising income, that mostly related to the Residents Guide and the aim was to cover the printing and distribution costs by advertising. In 2024, one advertisement had been done in exchange for two cinema advertisements promoting volunteering and the Literary Festival.

The Working Group reviewed the fees and charges for the year ahead. It also considered the issue of the commissioned charged on the Sum Up payment machine. It was agreed that the transactions by this method were small, and agreed that the costs should be absorbed, alongside normal banking charges paid by Council.

The Working Group recommended the 2024-25 Fees and Charges for adoption by Council (attached at Annex 1).

**The Working Group discussed the Investment Strategy and 2024/25 Investment Plan (at Annex 2) and recommended it for adoption by Council.
Community Grants**

The Working Group noted the proposed Community Grants 2024-25 and **agreed to recommend the Farnham Youth Choir request** (information arrived after the Community Working Group meeting) **for a contribution for bursaries to the World Choir Games be £4,000 from the 2023-24 Community Initiatives Fund.**

Closing of Accounts

The Working Group considered the timetable for the closing of the accounts for 2023-24, noting the challenges with the timing of Easter. The plan was to have the accounts closed and to get the paperwork ready for Strategy & Resources on 16th April and to Full Council on 25th April. The approved paperwork has to be submitted to the External Auditor by 30th June.

The accounting records for the financial year to which the audit relates, and all documents relating to those records, must be made available for inspection by any person interested, during a period of 30 working days set by the Council and including the first 10 working days of July.

Recommendation

The Dates for Public Inspection of the accounts in 2024 take place between Monday 3rd June and Friday 12th July.

5. Interim Internal Auditor's report

The Internal Auditor's Interim report (circulated to all councillors) was considered along with the recommendations and Officers' Report attached at Annex 3 to these Minutes.

The first visit covered the following:

- Review of opening balances and reporting of 22-23 audit opinion
- Follow up previous recommendations
- Testing of expenditure first 6 months of financial year
- Testing of income – first 6 months of financial year
- Risk management and insurance
- Budget monitoring reports
- Arrangements for inspection of accounts
- Bank reconciliations.

The Internal Auditor noted that the Council continues to operate a satisfactory system of financial control and had a few recommendations for consideration by Council. These are attached, with the Officers' comments, at Annex 3.

The Working Group agreed the officers' recommendations for adoption by Council.

6. Precept Report 2024/25

The Working Group considered the draft precept report for recommendation to Council. Members were mindful of the pressures on the local community as a result of inflation and the wider economy and debated the potential use of reserves, many of which were earmarked for specific projects. It was noted that the Council had made a positive step in allocating £90,000 for improving support for younger people and also faced significant inflationary pressures itself. It was felt that scope for increasing income from fees and charges further was limited as increased targets had been set.

The Working Group felt that use of some reserves was appropriate and agreed to recommend use of £22,382. This would leave a modest increase of 9p per week (£4.93 per annum) in the precept per Band D property which matched the new investment in services for younger people. The Working Group noted all other cost pressures had been absorbed within the budget. The Working Group agreed to investigate whether an FTC leaflet could be included with Council Tax bills to explain the increase and focus on supporting younger people.

Recommendation:

- 1) Reserves of £22,382 be used to reduce the 2024/25 precept increase;**
- 2) The 2024/25 precept be set at £1,424,818 representing a Band D equivalent amount of £78.15 per annum or £1.50 per week.**

7. Risk Management Report

The Working Group considered the Risk Management Report noting that the Working Groups had reviewed the risks under their areas of responsibility.

The report is recommended for adoption by Council.

8. Financial Ombudsman Decision regarding Farnham Town Council Complaint

The Working Group received the Financial Ombudsman's report on a complaint submitted in April 2022 by Farnham Town Council into the refusal by HSBC to increase the Commercial Card limit as approved by Council, without a traceable personal financial check on one of the Council's individual signatories. This means that one of the account signatories (councillors or Town Clerk) would need to be checked even though their personal finances are not connected to the Council's finances.

Although financial institutions state that customers should take their case up with the Financial Ombudsman if unhappy with a decision, it turns out that the legislation does not allow for town or parish council cases to be considered by the Ombudsman. The decision in the Ombudsman case (PNX-4672897-PON2) is that they have no jurisdiction to look into the complaint by Farnham Town Council.

This clarification and decision has implications for all town and parish councils in the country and requires a change in the legislation or there will be no recourse for poor service or problems encountered by town and parish councils with financial institutions and this is a matter that should be taken up by the National Association.

Recommendation

Farnham Town Council raises the issue with the National Association of Local Councils and the local MP of the need to update the legislation to resolve the fact that town and parish councils have no access to the Financial Ombudsman to resolve financial disputes.

9. Farnham Infrastructure Programme

- 1 Cllr Beaman provided an update on the meeting of the Farnham Infrastructure Board in December when Cllr Oliver had expressed a desire for the work to commence in 2024.

Cllr Beaman reported on a discussion with the project officer that had taken place that morning and advised that the consultation results were still being reviewed. He expressed concern that the safety audit had concluded that a bus layby outside the Queen's Head was not a requirement and the stop would still be in-line despite the representations by the Town Council. It was noted that the bus operator could call a public inquiry on that issue (or others affecting operation) but this would likely delay implementation.

It was noted that SCC had booked two years road space to implement the project, and this was welcomed. It was also noted The Water Lane works were set for March and the 20MPH works in Hale were set for July/August.

- 2 Cllr Beaman also advised that the Town Council had written a letter of objection to the Farnborough Airspace Consultation. There was a demonstration being arranged for 27th January and councillors had received an invitation to attend. The Working Group felt attendance should be a personal decision and did not recommend formal representation.

10. Contracts & Assets update

The Working Group received an update of current contracts and assets at Appendix N.

It also received tabled Notes of the Assets Task Group meeting, to which all councillors were invited bring everyone up to speed on the plans for Gostrey Meadow.

The Working Group noted the update on Contracts and assets matters in its report at Appendix N. It also received tabled Notes of the meeting of the Assets Task Group on 11 January, to which all councillors had been invited, to discuss the plans for Gostrey Meadow improvements.

The Ridgeway School and their architects had traced the history of the concept, prior to FTC taking over the land, and the positive pre-application report from Waverley planners received at the end of 2023. They spoke of the value the scheme could have in giving more than work experience for their young people with severe learning difficulties and their goal was to produce youngsters who can communicate, are socially resilient and contribute to society. They estimated this would benefit 30-40% of their pupils and former pupils in the estimated 3-4 days a week initially they would use the facility.

The Task Group had been concerned about the cost and viability of the scheme and also the amount of time it would take for improvements to take place and for the proposed café to be built. The Task Group said the essential items for Gostrey Meadow were a new toilet block, storage and play ground and that a permanent hardstanding which could be used by mobile cafes be investigated and included into any new designs. The idea of a canopy was also raised.

The Task Group view was endorsed by the Strategy & Resources Working Group who agreed to recommend commissioning a new design without the proposed café. The Working Group also agreed that Farnham Town Council should support the Ridgeway School in its primary ambition in providing work opportunities for its pupils and past students and Cllr Murray offered to speak with some local organisations such as the spire Café and Jubilee Hall to see if they could assist.

Recommendation to Council

It is recommended that

- 1. Plan A Architects be engaged to provide a series of drawings including a new toilet block, a new play area, an area for increased covered and uncovered storage for event equipment; hard standing area suitable for concession use, a covered area /canopy area**
- 2. FTC support Ridgeway School in achieving their aim of providing work opportunities for their students.**

II. Reports of Task Groups

I Younger People Task Group

Cllr White introduced the report at Appendix O which set out a proposal for the indicative allocation of the new funding allocated for supporting younger people.

The Working Group noted the desire, expressed at the last Younger People's Task Group and at Strategy & Resources/Council in December, to make an immediate impact with some of this funding and commission research during the 2024/25 financial year to better understand needs and actions; and allocates some funding for other groups (eg sporting, cultural, community etc) to provide additional youth holiday schemes for those who would not normally be able to access/afford them. The funding for additional provision and outreach in central Farnham was recommended to be earmarked for 40 Degrees, in north Farnham earmarked for the Hale Community Centre and some additional resource covering Wrecchlesham and other parts of Farnham.

Part of the focus would be to effectively reduce levels of anti social behaviour in the town recognising the significant reductions in financial support from SCC for youth facilities. Cllr Beaman has suggested Council would have to consider how far FTC was drawn into a situation that might require ever greater financial support and officer time to pick up responsibilities for which FTC had no statutory requirement to provide. There would also be the need in the coming financial year (perhaps linked into the research proposed) to start seeking alternative funding after the ending of National Lottery support for activities at Hale Community in 2025.

The Working Group noted initial discussions had taken place with representatives of the Hale Community Centre, 40 Degreez and the pastor of Jubilee Church who were revamping their hall as a community hub.

Further discussions were planned and a further report would go to the next cycle of meetings. Councillors were concerned about the challenges facing 40 Degreez and considered how best to support them. It was agreed a meeting would be set up with 40 Degreez which would include

the Mayor and Cllr Murray. It was agreed that a follow up request would be made to for clarity over how the support for Hale would add value.

Recommendation

It is recommended that the indicative allocations be

- 1) £30,000 for additional town centre outreach earmarked for 40 Degreez as proposed in the SLA discussion.**
- 2) £30,000 for activities/outreach in Hale and Wrecclisham (allocations to be determined).**
- 3) £20,000 for research in 2024-25 on priorities, need and potential funding requirements by FTC for 2025 and beyond to continue to develop a future proof strategy for youth organisations within the FTC area**
- 4) £10,000 for programmed activities by partners to provide sustained activity for younger people over the longer holiday periods.**

2 Infrastructure Planning Group

Statutory Challenge

The Working Group received details at Appendix P of Mr Justice Julian Knowles decision to hold a one day hearing to consider the Statutory Review requested by Farnham Town Council on the Planning Inspectorate's decision on Waverley Lane. The 'rolled up hearing' would have three elements. The first on whether the extension of time request submitted by FTC's solicitor should be allowed. The second on whether the Aarhus Cost Capping Convention applied in this case and the third on the substantive merits of the request for leave to appeal.

The Working Group discussed the implications of the rolled up hearing and the cost implications and the advice from the Council's barrister (Exempt Annex 1)

Any detailed discussion on these points will need to be discussed in exempt session at Council by virtue of the legally privileged information.

The arguments for the Aarhus convention claim had to be submitted by 19th January, and a hearing date would be determined by the court, but was considered unlikely before April.

Cllr Martin and Cllr Murray left at this point.

Farnham Neighbourhood Plan

The Working Group noted that the Call for sites was underway and that Waverley had agreed to share the details with Farnham. The timescales for receiving the information were not clear and it was likely there would be a difference of opinion on what counted as a strategic site. Previously, 100 or less were dealt with under the Neighbourhood Plan, but Waverley were considering a lower number. This had still to be decided.

It was noted that the school places team had met with Waverley and all planning applications would be sent direct to the school places team in future. The Working Group heard that the CIL implications for helping meet school places was significant.

12. Consultations

This item was deferred.

13. Items for future meetings

The Working Group noted matters for future meetings included:

- 1) Community Lottery
- 2) Website and Communications Review
- 3) Council Business Plan 2024-2028
- 4) Boom Credit Union
- 5) Dependant Carers' allowances

14. Date of next meeting

The date of the next meeting was agreed as Tuesday 5th March at 2pm.

The meeting ended at 5.42 pm

Notes written by Iain Lynch

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