

Dorchester Town Council

Policy Committee

15 November 2021

Present: Councillors R. Biggs, T. Harries, J. Hewitt, F. Hogwood and G. Jones (Chair).

Apologies: Councillors B. Armstrong-Marshall, A. Chisholm and S. Hosford.

Attending: Councillors S. Jones and M. Rennie

10. Minutes and Declarations of Interest

In the absence of the Chair and Vice-Chair Councillor G. Jones was appointed as Chair for the meeting.

The Minutes of the Committee of 20 September 2021, adopted by Council on 27 September 2021, were taken as read and signed.

The following declarations of interest were made:-

Councillor S. Jones declared an interest as the Dorset Council representative on Dorchester Arts (Minute 13).

Councillors R. Biggs and S. Jones declared an interest as Trustees of the Dorchester Youth and Community Centre (Minute 13). Councillor M. Rennie declared an interest as the Council's representative to the Centre and as a member of the Centre's Management Committee.

Councillors R. Biggs and S. Jones declared an interest as Dorset Council members of the Dorchester Heritage Joint Committee (Minute 13).

Councillors F. Hogwood and G. Jones declared an interest as Dorchester Town Council members of the Joint Committee. The Clerk offered advice that, as a body with a direct responsibility to both Councils there was no requirement to leave the room or not take part in the debate on this issue.

Councillor G. Jones declared an interest as a member of the Organising Committee for the Thomas Hardy Victorian Fair and Heritage Open Day (Minute 13).

11. Financial Update at 31 October 2021

The Committee received the Financial Controller's report on the month 7 financial position, noting actual spending slightly below the budget profile. He also reported the outcome of the first Internal Audit visit of the financial year.

Members asked questions regarding the impact of the underspend on Outdoor Services staff on service levels and Community Infrastructure Levy income.

Resolved

- a) That the Payments list, totalling £476,151.17, is approved
- b) That the Internal Audit Report, and the officer response to it, is noted

12. Strategic and Operational Risk Register

The Committee considered a report of the Deputy Town Clerk relating to the Council's Risk Registers.

The Committee reviewed each of the high level risks included in the report, adding detail to the Risk table where appropriate.

The Committee identified four potential new risks for the register.

Recommended to Council

- i) That the assessed high level strategic and operational risks be approved
- ii) That risks related to the transition from the current Town Clerk to their successor, staff working from home receiving insufficient training, cybersecurity and the consequences of a poorly developed Local Plan, be added to the register
- iii) That the Strategic and Operational Risk Registers, as a whole, be approved

13. Revenue Budget 2022/23: Discretionary Core Grants and Special Items

The Committee considered a report covering existing and possible grants to the core operational costs of some important partner organisations, and also considered the future role of the Special Items line of the Budget.

Councillor S. Jones left the meeting. The Clerk provided an update regarding support for Dorchester Arts. A Member expressed concern that staff engaged by Dorchester Arts to carry out Town Hall keeping duties might not receive the same terms and conditions as those employed to carry out similar duties by the Town Council.

Councillors S. Jones rejoined the meeting.

The Clerk provided an update regarding support for and Dorchester Cricket Club.

Councillors R. Biggs and S. Jones left the meeting. As the Council's representative to the Dorchester Youth and Community Centre Councillor M. Rennie addressed the Committee highlighting the value of the Council's contribution to core costs, the difficult of securing grants from other sources to fund core costs, the condition of the Centre building and highlighted the need for long term certainty with a grant at a level which enabled the Centre to continue to function. Councillor Rennie then left the meeting. The Committee discussed the need to undertake a review of funding arrangements for the Centre.

Resolved

- a) That a review of the Council's relationship with Dorchester Youth and Community Centre is commenced, led by Councillors Harries, Hewitt, Hogwood and Hosford; until the review is completed the Medium Term Financial Strategy should continue to budget as at present

Councillors R. Biggs, S. Jones and M. Rennie rejoined the meeting.

The Committee considered options for offering grant support to Citizens Advice, based on either support for a dedicated element of their work or a general contribution towards core running costs.

Resolved

- b) That the Town Clerk contact Citizens Advice to discuss the possible provision of annual grant to support the general work of the organisation and report back to the next meeting

Noting that it would be difficult to separate out discussion regarding financial support for the Dorchester Heritage Joint Committee from support for events that it had been instrumental in developing Councillor G. Jones left the meeting. Councillor Biggs took the Chair. The Committee discussed the importance of ensuring that the work of the Joint Committee in promoting the town's heritage continues. While noting the successful development of the Thomas Hardy Victorian Fair and the Heritage Open Day the Committee also recognised the potential for reducing some of the costs associated with them over time. A Member asked that it be emphasised that the Organising Committee should develop its relationship with Dorchester BID and seek funding from that source.

Resolved

- c) That an annual contribution of £3,000 is included in the Council's draft budget to support the work of Dorchester Heritage Joint Committee; to be reviewed prior to the 2024/25 budget setting
- d) That the sum of £8,500 is included in each of the 2022/23 and 2023/24 draft budgets to support the delivery of the Thomas Hardy Victorian Fair and Heritage Open Days

Councillor G. Jones rejoined the meeting as Chair.

The Committee considered the benefits of retaining a separate Special Items budget in the Medium Term Financial Strategy.

Resolved

- e) That the 2022/23 draft budget is prepared on the basis that the practice of budgeting for Special Items is discontinued; that £7,000 is added to the Parks and Open Spaces Maintenance budget and £12,000 is added to budgets relating to Partner Events and Sponsorship, but also taking account of minutes b), c), and d) above

14. Corporate Plan Update

The Committee noted a report of the Town Clerk that provided an update on the milestones that the Council had set for projects included in the Corporate Plan.

The Committee considered an evaluation of the potential to develop 19 North Square as affordable housing, noting that an option to provide 3 1 bed flats was not financially viable and that an option to provide a mix of 5 flats was on the margin of viability and may not be acceptable in planning terms. Members considered the risk that, despite significant investment, the flats created as a result might not be suitable for tenants.

Resolved

That having fully explored all options to release 19 North Square as affordable housing, it be released for sale on the open market once vacated.

With regard to the Cornhill public realm project the Committee noted the need for pre-application planning advice and more detailed financial evaluation prior to progressing the scheme further. In response to points made by a Member the Clerk confirmed that at this stage the Council was not in a position to finalise ideas for the scheme.

Chairman